

J. W. MORRICE

Hans Savage

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With the 1860's we now enter a period of doubt and uncertainty in the realm of Canadian Painting. True, the country had developed a long way since the days of Kane and Krieghoff. Societies had been formed both in Montreal and Toronto to encourage and foster an interest in Art, but the trouble lay in the fact that the country was still in the grip of European influence. Everything had to be imported, - nothing was of any value unless it had the stamp of either France or England upon it, - and when it came to the world of pictures matters were in a sorry state - a condition we are not even free from to-day. But you were not considered as having become socially established unless you had at least two good grey Dutch pictures hanging on your walls. Consequently our own artists had to choose between a starvation ticket and patterning their work along European lines, if they were to eke out an existence at all. Everything must be a gentle grey and rather sentimental in subject matter. Hence the accumulation of the heaps of inoffensive but quite characterless canvases, in which so much of the private capital of Canada is tied up.

Nevertheless, there are one or two outstanding figures at this dreary period and because of their independent stand exerted a strong influence over Canadian art.

Homer Watson, for example, stood his own ground, and instead of following the crowd to Europe was content to settle in his Ontario home town of Doon and paint the local setting. He has been called by some a Canadian Constable, for he resembles Constable in the fact that he worked in a low key and enjoyed painting great sturdily stemmed oaks and elms. In a canvas called "The Flood Gate" Watson

strikes a very dramatic note. Over a low-lying stretch of country a great hurricane is sweeping. Masses of olive green trees bend before it and the silver of their upturned leaves contrasts with the dark sky. Over the flat fields you can see in the distance other tree forms caught in the same gale. In the foreground the figure of a man labours with the heavy wheel of the Flood Gate and as the water is released it rushes in green foam through the apertures. As if in contrast to a scene of raging activity a group of cattle stand motionless, heads down and solid into the teeth of the wind. They are notes of pale pink and cream and relieve the silvers, blacks and greys of the landscape.

Horatio Walker is perhaps the most successful painter of his group, and for his canvases of farm life on the Island of Orleans he has been called a Canadian Millet, - an indication, by the way, of how directly our early Art was derived from the Masters of the Old World. Another name is that of the noble and sympathetic William Brymner who taught for many long years at the Art Association in Montreal and did much to encourage a broader outlook in Art; and above all there is in the struggle to paint Canadian snow instead of old Dutch women peeling apples, the leading figure of Maurice Cullen, whose courageous and vigorous insistence on outdoor work coupled with that of J.W. MORRICE shattered the dead hand of the European School, - that is, the dark Dutch cloud, as far as the artist was concerned.

The last named artist, JAMES WILSON MORRICE, remained a figure veiled in mystery during his nomadic career, but although he spent much of his life abroad, he is claimed by Canada as her most

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accomplished painter. It was through his contact with French impressionism that Canada was brought in touch with the new free treatment of colour.

J.W.Morrice was one of the favoured few, for he was born not only with a silver spoon in his mouth, but with a rare talent. This he valued above everything, and to the development of it he devoted all his time and energy. Born in Montreal in 1865, the son of David Morrice, textile merchant and philanthropist, James was surrounded with all the luxury of a plutocratic society. He attended H.J.Lyall's private school. It stood on the site of the present Ritz Carlton. As a child he showed great interest in boats and loved drawing and carving them, and this love of boats, as his paintings prove, he never lost. His development as an artist was slow, but gradual. Some early water sketches were not remarkable other than that he did them at all, and as an indication of the slant his mind was taking. At twenty-one James was sent to the University of Toronto and later to Osgoode Hall to prepare himself for the Law. At college he was rather retiring, not greatly interested in the various college societies, but he possessed one trait which endeared him to his fellows - a love of music as shown in his passion for the flute - it remained with him as a life-long delight.

He became a much more jovial companion, however, when he accompanied his friends to a down-town tavern - it was here that he acquired the taste for the "cup that cheers" - this taste also he retained all the days of his life, he was always excellent company.

While attached to a firm of lawyers in Toronto he made his first public declaration of his love for painting by submitting a

picture to the Ontario Society of Artists, which was refused. But he was more kindly treated by the Academy, and the next year, in the Spring Exhibition of Montreal, two of his canvases were shown. No sooner had he completed his legal education than he decided to forsake that profession for Art. Consternation reigned, as we can well imagine, for it was almost as singular a form of heresy as Florence Nightingale's choice of nursing had been in her day. Two loyal friends helped him through this difficult period, - one, William Scott, of Montreal, an Art dealer, whose quiet and friendly gallery on St. James St. became a refuge and source of encouragement, and the other, Sir William Van Horne, President of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and probably the greatest art collector our country has ever had. He recognized talent in a sketch of Morrice's and not only bought it to encourage him, but also tackled his family upon the idea of allowing James to take up this new interest. Sir William was successful, and soon a joyful young man was packing his trunks for Paris.

Morrice's arrival in Paris was not a glamourous affair. Quite a stranger he took a room in the Hotel Moderne and then looked about for a place <sup>in which</sup> to study. The Académie Julian, the largest and best known, became his centre for a short time, but the rowdy and undisciplined atmosphere of the studio soon drove him to find a more congenial setting. He met Harpignies, a good and capable painter, who gave him a fine understanding of the essentials and encouraged him to express himself.

The beginnings of his work in Paris show a somewhat restrained style compared to the freedom of his later treatment. His sketch

books were full of careful and detailed drawings of boats and trees with here and there pastoral landscapes, fences and fishing vessels.

The first Canadian sketches are of the St. Lawrence, for he made many visits home. He loved to depict old Quebec, - a street in the snow, or the citadel hill at night, a harmony of blue greens and silver. Sketches of this period before 1900 show a growing delight in houses and sleds, country lanes and woodpiles, objects which he used later in a score of paintings. The Ferry from Levis to Quebec fascinated him, and he gives us several paintings of the Ferry wharf with Quebec, a pale pink cliff rising against a grey green sky, and the boats plying backwards and forwards across the blue channel.

As the years passed Morrice became a unique figure in the Paris art world. Always charming and entertaining and immaculately dressed, he would be seen in the cafés at Montmartre and Montparnasse making rapid sketches on small wooden panels. Here he mingled with the brightest minds in the painting world. Men such as Seurat, Renoir, Matisse, interested him profoundly, and he enjoyed their theories, but he went his own way. With that architectural severity almost dominant to-day the work of Morrice has nothing in common. Colour, the tones of light upon foliage or upon a building, the subtle gradations of light that go to make up the infinite recessions of landscape was his field. As an artist above all he appealed to the senses.

As a painter of his native environment of the Province of Quebec with its villages, twisting roads and ice bridges, he first received official recognition in France. In 1906 the town of Lyons purchased a canvas, in referring to which Marius Leblond writes: "In a snow soft as featherdown a blue sleigh plunges - a passage of

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movement through the velvety silences of the cold." It was Morrice's treatment of snow which first drew our attention to the fact that snow is not white. At first he painted it olive green and blue grey, and then it changed as he became more interested in the use of the purer colour of the impressionists to a glistening mixture of purples, violets and ochres.

In one of his paintings, "The Ice Bridge" he shows us a canvas divided into simple horizontal levels; the snow is a series of delicately changing tones which merge finally in the opposite shore on which you can just distinguish suggestions of compact houses veiled in a dark warm light. The middle distance is broken by black notes of barges frozen in the ice, and towards the foreground a dark horse drawing a purple sleigh moves directly across the canvas. The sky is in a low opalescent tone, full of changing light which is sympathetically reflected in the drifts so simple and yet so utterly complete. You can almost feel the oncoming snow.

Mr. Donald Buchanan in his biography of J.W. Morrice, upon which I have based my talk and which I advise you most heartily to read, sums up Morrice's wanderings as follows:

From the beach at St. Malo to the native quarters at Tangiers the man with the palette-sketch box went, and working wherever a chair was comfortable and a table with whiskey or absinthe handy, he brought back his vision of the world. Tunis, Marseilles, Antwerp, Montreal, Santiago in Cuba, Jamaica and Trinidad - so the record grew - and as the years proceeded the pale moonstone surfaced panels became richer, more like rubies, at times veined with lines running nervously beneath masses of thin pigment.

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Few are the painters who know when not to express useless details and yet hold to the essentials. J.W.Morrice possesses this quality in the highest degree. His pictures impart just that which their author wishes. Whether he sets up his easel in Brittany, whether he speaks to you of the sadness of the little provincial square of Concarneau, where appears the silhouette of a woman white-capped and clothed in black, whether he shows to us the quays of old Paris, with irregular buildings picturesquely pierced with windows, the oily green waters of the Seine and the stalls of the old booksellers, on a November morning, it is always the same subtle and personal vision. His pictures unlike Krieghoff, are made up of simple elements with nothing in them which suggests episode-----he occupies himself with the mood of the subject rather than the precise character and contour. To repeat a word formerly attributed to Corot, - it is done with nothing, but everything is there.

Morrice died in Tunis, January 23rd, 1924, and like the Prodigal Son he gives back to his native land the stored up beauty of his work, and pointed out to us new roads of delight in the world of colour harmonies.

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